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STATE FOR SA/INS
USPACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS OFFER LITTLE INSIGHT INTO NEXT STEPS ON PEACE PROCESS; CO-CHAIRS TO BE CONSULTED

REF: A. COLOMBO 2008

[B.](#) COLOMBO 2003

[C.](#) COLOMBO 1979

[D.](#) COLOMBO 1929

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) In public statements made since his November 17 election, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has offered few concrete details into how he plans to realize his oft-stated goal of achieving a political resolution to the conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In particular, how he plans to bridge the sizable gaps between his policies and the LTTE's demands remains unclear, but his affirmation of a key role for the Co-chairs, conveyed in a November 28 address to the diplomatic community, and a separate, private request to Norway to remain as facilitator are hopeful signs.
End summary.

PRESIDENT READY FOR TALKS:
HOW AND WHEN UNCLEAR

[12.](#) (SBU) In a series of public statements since his November 17 election, including his November 18 inauguration speech (Ref C), his first address before Parliament (or the "Throne Speech") on November 25 and a November 28 briefing to the diplomatic corps, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has offered few concrete details on how he plans to advance the peace process. On each occasion he has repeated his offer to engage in direct and immediate talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but has given no specific indication of how he expects to encourage the Tigers back to the table. Indeed, his comments before Sri Lankan audiences--the inaugural address and the policy statement before Parliament--emphasized his commitment to a unitary Sri Lanka, his intention to "revise" the Ceasefire Agreement and his plan to include Muslims and all other "interested parties" in peace talks--all non-starters for the LTTE. Moreover, his speech before Parliament specifically repudiated the LTTE's "concepts of traditional homelands and self-determination" and pledged to uphold the right of any member of any ethnic group to live anywhere in the country "on the grounds that the entire territory is the homeland of all communities."

[13.](#) (U) Besides talking to the Tigers, the President undertook in his parliamentary address to include all "political parties, pressure groups, NGOs, religious organizations and the media" in "open discussions" aimed at building the ever-elusive national consensus on the peace process. At the same time, he said, the Government will "properly organize" the facilitation services provided by the United Nations (note: the UN has not performed a facilitation role in the peace process) and "the international community."

LESS POLARIZING, MORE FORTHCOMING
WITH ENVOYS

[14.](#) (SBU) In contrast to his remarks before Sri Lankan audiences, Rajapaksa's November 28 briefing of the diplomatic corps presented a more modulated, less polarizing approach. Omitting any reference to the preservation of a unitary state as part of a political solution, the President instead noted only that "the people of Sri Lanka have expressed their confidence" in his views on the peace process, and emphasized his plans for greater inclusiveness and transparency in the process. Rather than "revising" the Ceasefire Agreement (which the LTTE has already made plain it will not consider), he suggested instead "reviewing" it to improve its implementation--something the LTTE had already agreed to do, at least in principle, in the late days of former President Kumaratunga's administration. In tacit acknowledgment of

international concern at possible Government involvement in the "dirty war," he pledged to uphold the ceasefire (a point notably absent from the considerably longer policy speech before Parliament) and to adopt a human rights charter fully compliant with international conventions. He also expressed gratitude for foreign aid to support reconstruction in the north and east and appealed for "international assistance to ensure that peace making is not at the cost of democracy and pluralism."

15. (C) In another marked departure from his previous statements, in his comments to the diplomats Rajapaksa noted the need to begin consultations on the peace process with the four Co-chairs--Japan, US, EU and Norway--his first public acknowledgment of the group since the campaign and his first positive mention of Norway (albeit in its role as a Co-chair, rather than facilitator). In the Ambassador's conversation with Rajapaksa after the speech, the President told him that he had inserted the reference to the Co-chairs after his conversation with the Ambassador on November 25 (Ref B), when the Ambassador had explicitly asked the President what he intended with regard to the Co-chairs. In a separate conversation on November 28, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera told the Ambassador that he planned to meet the Co-chairs the following week. The Co-chairs have also requested a meeting with the President, and we expect that may also happen next week.

QUIET OLIVE BRANCH TO NORWAY?

16. (C) On November 28 Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar told the Ambassador that new Acting Head of the Peace Secretariat John Gooneratne (who is replacing, at least for

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now, Jayantha Dhanapala, who announced his retirement on November 10) had called in Brattskar, at the direction of ForMin Samaraweera, on November 26 to convey that the government wants Norway to continue in its role as facilitator. The government was still working out the modality and timing of publicly announcing this, however, Gooneratne reportedly explained. Brattskar told the Ambassador that he had replied that Norway is ready to continue if both parties want it to do so and if Norway is convinced it can play a positive role.

SOME THOUGHTS ON DEVOLUTION

17. (C) In a November 29 lunch hosted by President Rajapaksa for visiting former President Clinton, Rajapaksa told the Ambassador and former President Clinton that he is considering, as an initial overture to the LTTE, offering provincial councils in Tiger-controlled territory substantial devolution of power, including police, land and finances. (Note: As reported Ref D, an NGO contact had told us that Rajapaksa, via back-channel communication with the Tigers, had suggested a similar offer during the campaign, which he had described as a substitute for the interim administration the LTTE had been demanding. The LTTE's reported reaction to this offer was that Rajapaksa was "practical" and realistic--an assessment echoed in LTTE leader Prabhakaran's November 27 Heroes' Day speech (Ref A). End note.) Rajapaksa added that he would still like India to assume a more prominent role in the peace process. The Ambassador commented that the idea of real devolved powers may have some merit, but the term "Provincial Councils" is likely to trigger a negative reaction with the LTTE--just as the term "federalism" causes a negative reaction among certain quarters in the south. The Ambassador also suggested that it might be useful to persuade the Indians to become more involved in tandem with other international players, rather than as a solo performer.

COMMENT

18. (C) It is all very well for Rajapaksa to declare he is ready for talks--just as it all very well for Prabhakaran to declare he is ready for Rajapaksa to deliver a political solution (Ref B). Actually achieving these difficult goals is obviously a very different matter. While it is encouraging that Rajapaksa has begun to think about what new offers he might put on the table, the danger remains that the nationalist rhetoric with Sri Lankan audiences may temper his ability to make "practical" and realistic overtures. There is an enormous gulf between Rajapaksa's insistence on a unitary state versus LTTE insistence on self-determination and the ground that must be covered to get to an eventual peace agreement. Rajapaksa's appeal to the Co-chairs (and his less public overture to Norway) are hopeful signs that he recognizes the important role that the international

community could play in helping bridge this gap. We plan to consult with other Co-chair representatives in advance of the expected meetings with the Foreign Minister and President.

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